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JAPANESE IDEAS IN AN AMERICAN HOUSE

BY ELSIE DARLING COGGESHALL

WHEN I lived in Japan, my mind was always revolving round the problem of how to have interesting interiors like the Japanese, so simple and satisfying to the eye, and how at the same time to secure the amount of comfort in them, that we do in our more cumbersome style of building and furnishing.

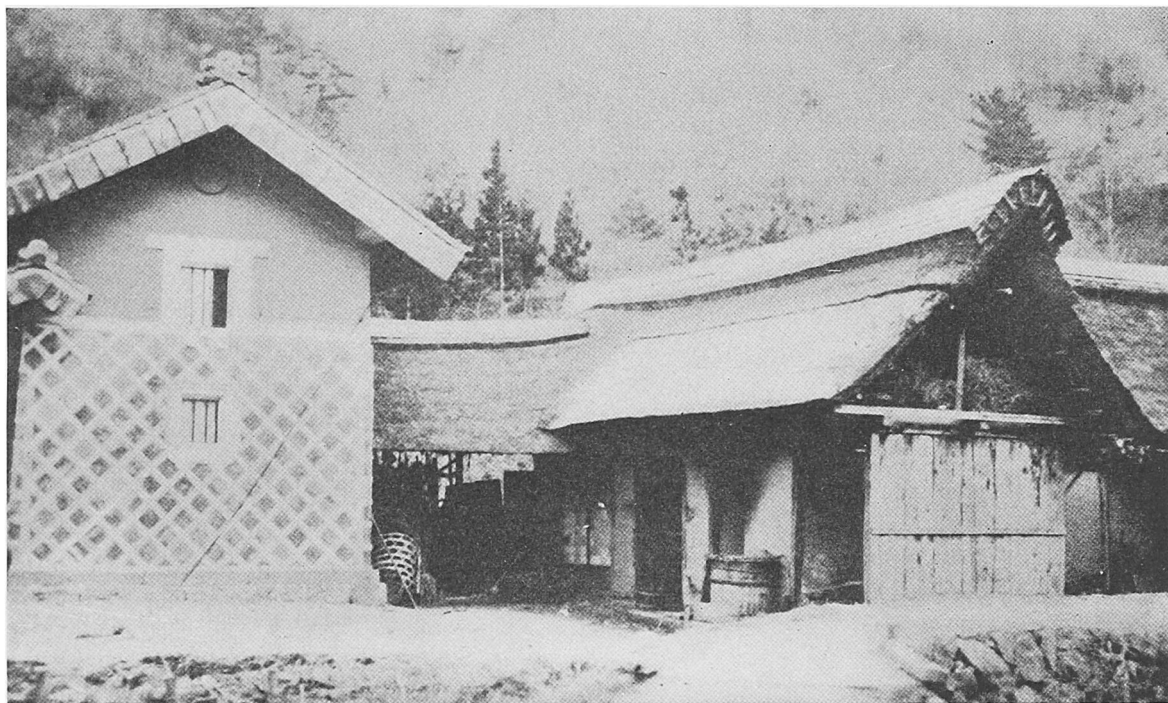
I found on returning to America, where people are more and more crowded into rooms of small dimensions, that the application of Japanese principles, by which light airy spaciousness can be obtained in small enclosures, has here a practical as well as an æsthetic value.

When you first enter a Japanese room, you cannot refrain from exclaiming, "How clean it looks, how fresh and light!" Perhaps later you may read of how the fairies tormented the naughty girl who hid her plum stones down the cracks in the matting, and this may lead to other enlightening facts, but nevertheless the first impression is a strong one. It comes from the use of light tones. The woodwork is neither varnished nor painted, but left as it comes from the carpenter's planè. Contrary to our expectations, it preserves its freshness for years, as long as it is used indoors and not exposed to the weather. Woodwork plays a large part in the effect of the room. The ceiling is of wood, the beams and posts are left exposed and the shoji, which admit light all along one side of a room, have a skeleton framework of wood. The latticed effect of this as well as the solid baseboard are visible from the interior. Light being admitted to within eight or ten inches of the floor-level, the high lights of the room are found in the floor. This is not of fine woods as our floors frequently are, but made of rough timber, which is later covered with blocks of matting, six

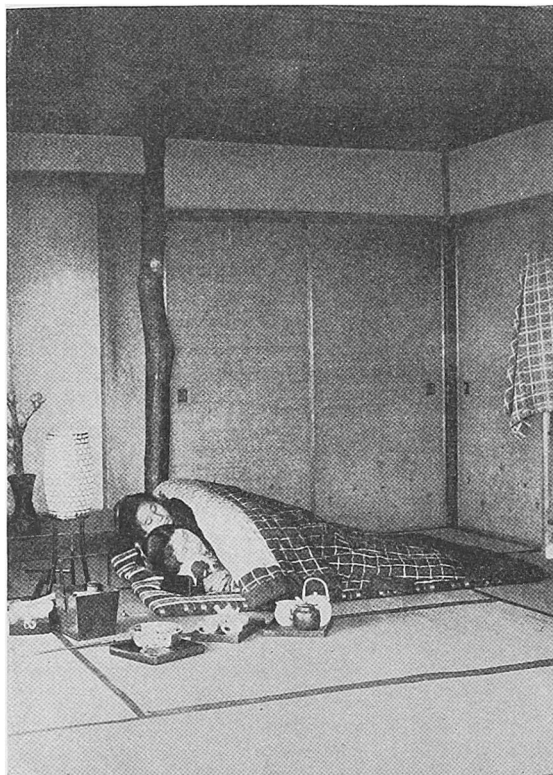
feet by three feet by three inches, arranged in a pattern, each block being bound along its sides by black linen, or in the case of the wealthy, by a rich dark brocade. There is a certain soft yield to this floor as you step on it, and that of course, means that the surface is not absolutely level, and would take on lights and shades. Not every light-colored floor would have the same value. I try to picture a bedroom floor of our own painted white or yellow, for instance, but cannot regard it with pleasure. The surface at best would be hard and shiny and cold, whereas the texture of the matting throws up little golden lights. Perhaps if the Canton matting were used in our rooms, much of the Japanese effect could be got by a thick padding of newspapers before the matting is laid. I think there is nothing so inspiring as fresh matting. In a lesser degree, it gives the stimulus of the flare of foot-lights.

With the woodwork, ceiling and floor all light in tone, the whole effect is bound to be light. I have not spoken of the charming effect of the white paper panes in the shoji. It is difficult for those who have not seen them to imagine that paper could admit enough light to be pleasant. One misses the transparency of glass, to be sure, and the contact that it gives with the outer world, but the paper used is so fine, that the rooms are not darkened thereby, and the filtered sunlight is particularly gracious and becoming to objects in the room.

As for the walls of a Japanese room other than the light shoji, they will be found to be in harmony with the woodwork. Delightful materials are used to cover the sliding doors which separate one room from another, usually something of the nature of grass-cloth, or rough linen, shot through with a little metallic pattern. Sometimes a painting of a



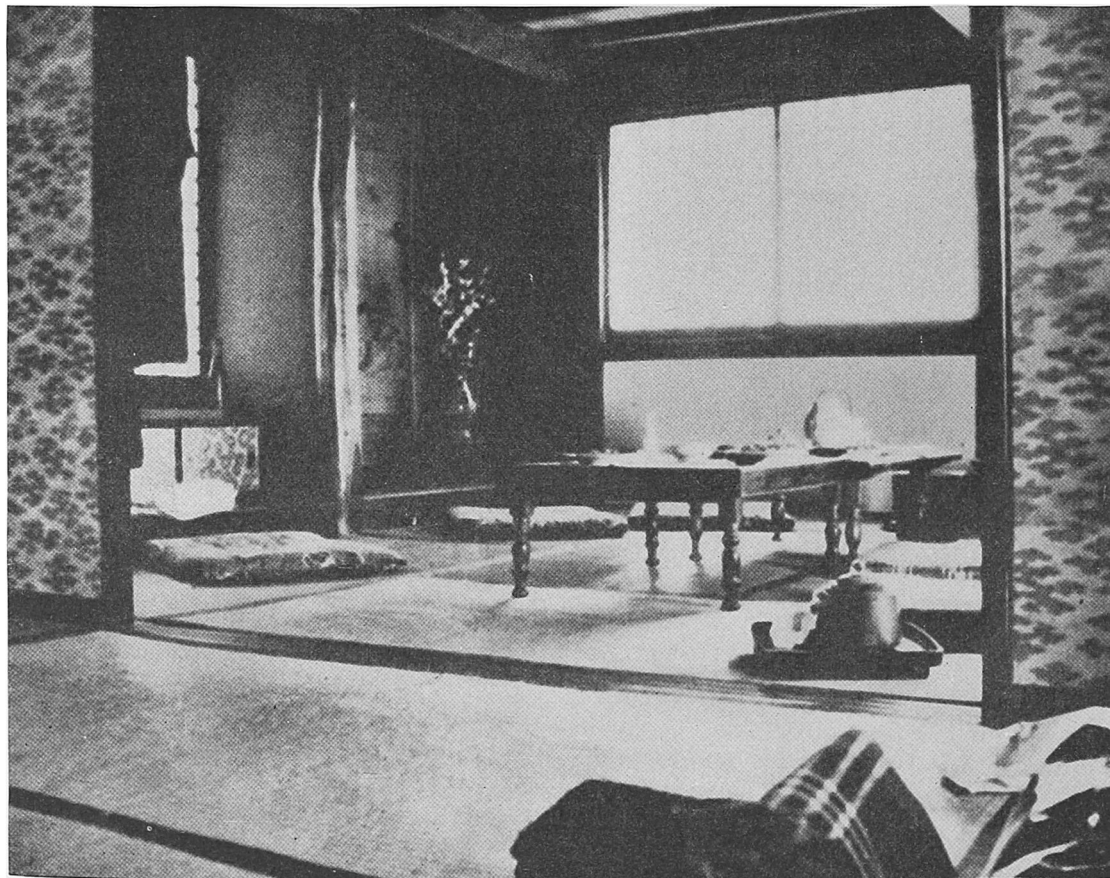
THE JAPANESE HAS HIS "KURA," AN EXTERIOR BUILDING OF SUPPOSEDLY FIREPROOF CONSTRUCTION, IN WHICH HIS VALUABLES AND ART-TREASURES ARE STORED



A COUPLE OF "FUTONS" LAID ON THE SOFT MATTED FLOORS MAKE A COMFORTABLE BED



DELIGHTFUL MATERIALS ARE USED TO COVER THE SLIDING DOORS, WHICH SEPARATE ONE ROOM FROM ANOTHER



THE SLIDING DOORS WORK IN SLOTS. THE UPPER SLOT IS MADE DEEP ENOUGH, SO THAT THE DOOR CAN BE SHOVED UP, SLIPPED OUT OF THE LOWER GROOVE, AND THUS ENTIRELY REMOVED. INN AT MINOBU

spray of flowers, or a pale mountain outline is washed in on a light background. I saw an elaborate design for a series of sliding panels in an exhibition in Tokyo. It was intended to stretch across the width of a room. A receding bamboo fence was topped by an evergreen hedge, and above that there was nothing but atmosphere. It seemed to open the room to the free air.

Even in the rooms of quietest design, one's interest is never allowed to droop, because of the attention to detail. One's eye falls, for instance, on the matched graining of the wood, on the effective use of black lines in the matting and frequently in the shining lacquer frames of the doors. One discovers, perhaps, a wondrously rich design in the bronze hikite, the depression for the hand by which the sliding doors are moved. But the main interest is focused in the to-ko-no-ma, the recess whose floor is a few inches above the ordinary level, and in which are displayed a hanging painting on silk, and a jar of flowers.

The proper use of lines is a second very important method by which the Japanese get their effect of spaciousness. Some construction lines that we think inevitable are obliterated, and other ornamental ones that broaden or heighten are emphasized. How often in our American homes we break up restful spaces! For example, in a small room we need two doors in one wall, one as an exit, one as an entrance to a closet. The room is already high and narrow.

covered with periodicals, newspapers, and novels, the writing-table absorbed by its big blotting-pad and shaded lamp, the uncompromising piano set across a corner.

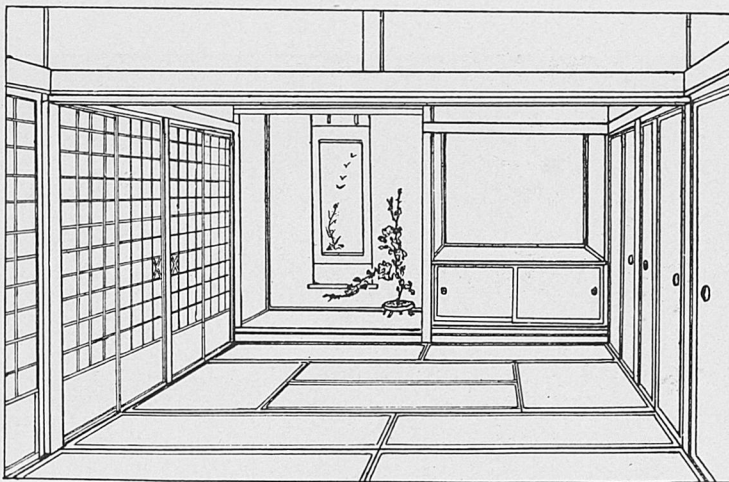
YELLOW OIL-PAPER "CHO-CHIN"



Take our system of decoration, which is is to put on view all our choicest ornaments in places where they will show best, to dress our walls with pictures with no other purpose than that our walls should not look bare,—and this with no reference to development, no leading from lesser objects of interest to our one great and beautiful thing. We ought to work for a crisis in our rooms, such as is supplied by the Japanese to-ko-no-ma, the recess sacred to the one beautiful hanging panel, the one studied floral poem.

We should have some appreciation of the ideal of simplicity which is always in the minds of the Japanese. We crowd our rooms with too many and too costly things, but they appreciate the fact that it is impossible to sense the full beauty of an article unless it can be given a setting where there will be nothing to distract one's attention from it. They change the kakemono every day or at different

WE OUGHT TO WORK FOR A CRISIS IN OUR ROOMS, SUCH AS IS SUPPLIED BY THE JAPANESE TO-KO-NO-MA



THE RECESS SACRED TO THE ONE BEAUTIFUL HANGING PANEL, THE ONE STUDIED FLORAL POEM

The contractor will probably plan for frames four inches wide, and varnish or paint them some contrasting color to the wall-paper. He makes the doors as massive and as much in evidence, closed or open, as the money allows for. In a similar situation the Japanese would secure a lateral construction line running a foot or so below the ceiling, and from this hang a series of panels, two of which would be sliding doors, but of such similar construction to the rest of the space that they would be noticeable only when opened. The lateral line, of course, lends breadth to the room.

When I first came back and saw American houses with Japanese eyes, I wrestled with a feeling of suffocation. How many things were piled into one room!

Take our ordinary family room with all the daily activities in evidence, the big table in the middle

festivals or when a special guest is expected. They have a true reserve in furnishing their homes which is worthy of imitation.

The Japanese custom is to sweep everything out of sight that is not in immediate use. Consequently they must have convenient accessible places to store things that are going to be needed. I have seen Japanese rooms, in which the floor space of the closets was one fourth of the entire floor space of the room. Occasionally an alcove is provided, into which the chest of drawers is fitted, so that the front comes flush with the wall above and alongside.

Then the Japanese has his "Kura," an exterior building of supposedly fireproof construction, in which his valuables and art treasures are stored. They are not only thus preserved from dust, but reserved for a freshness of impression every time that an occasion demands their special exhibition.

The Japanese "Kura" we may never attain to. We may never come closer to it than the renting of a small space in a Safe Deposit Vault. Our conditions are different and we must seek our own solution. Though I foresee that much educational work must first be done with the landlords, who build to make a striking first impression on would-be renters, and who try to make rooms big at the expense of closets, I cannot overemphasize our need for a more liberal provision for storage space. We need attics and store-rooms, large closets, and shelves. These we can have. At least they are entirely within American experience. In their absence, the quality of mind that has invented for us a drawer under our mattress may find other similar solutions. In any case I am sure there is something practical, and something more useful than casting everything on the surface of a table.

A rudimentary principle of Japanese construction is the mobility of some of the partitions. Think how convenient it would be when we have company to be able to avail ourselves of a hastily provided partition, or in the case of a large company to be able to throw two or three rooms into one! The Japanese do this with great ease. The sliding doors work in slots, rather jerkily in the poor houses, but with absolute precision in wealthy homes, where only well-seasoned wood is used. The upper slot is made deep enough so that the door can be shoved up, slipped out of the lower groove, and thus entirely removed. The doors are of very light construction.

I had a bedroom in Japan that was a great satisfaction. By day it was a long room of dignified dimensions. At night it was divided in half by sliding doors. The end in which the beds stood was thus shut off, and there the windows remained open, while the other end could be warmed for a dressing-room.

The Japanese partitions have one great disadvantage. They are not sound-proof and do not afford privacy. Our doors hung from above and running on rollers would provide these conditions, and if they could be accommodated, when pushed back, in the wall of an adjoining room, they would give the same uninterrupted opening between two rooms as the Japanese doors do.

Every Japanese house is made of a wall within a wall, the outer of solid wooden doors, the inner of paper stretched over latticed wooden frames, the shoji of which I have spoken. Between lies a narrow space, about three feet wide, forming a piazza in the day-time, when the wooden doors are removed. In pleasant weather the paper doors are also pushed back. The open-air effect of a corner room, light but shielded from the bright sun, was one of the most delightful features of the Japanese method. This I feel sure could be transplanted to our summer cottages, if not to our winter homes.

I might possibly grow so Japanese as to banish cot-beds altogether, and send to Japan for piles of

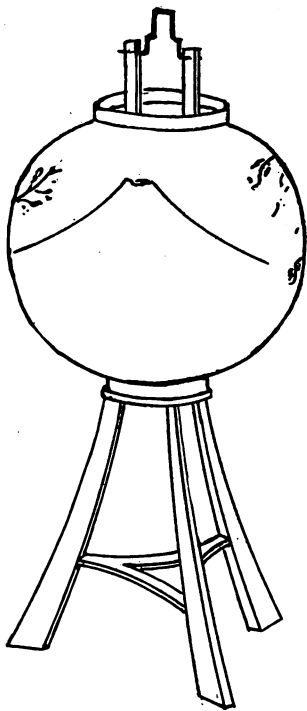
"futons," and then I could have as many children in a room as there was convenient floor space. These "futons" are light thick wadded mattresses, covered with gay checkered materials, usually brown with a yellow stripe, cotton or silk according to your purse. A couple of these laid on the soft matted floors make a comfortable bed. In the daytime the futons are aired in the sun and laid away on shelves till night,—and the room becomes a spacious sitting-room. I would like to banish some furnishings altogether, and replace them with light wicker things; to bring in covers of Japanese design for the cots, and slide my shirt-waists into a "tansu" of light wood bound with black iron. My papers I would keep in a series of shallow drawers, high and narrow against the wall, of the same design as the "tansu."

I knew a French woman in Japan, whose married children had a beautiful rest from family responsibilities, because she used to entertain in her little summer house all the fifteen grandchildren. There were two large rooms in her second story, one for the boys, the other for the girls. Round the enclosed piazza were rows of basins, each with its tooth-brush hanging beside it. Round the walls of the rooms were great closets, holding the piles of "futons" and personal belongings of the children. Across the road were some famous hot springs and the children were in and out of them two or three times a day. So they lacked neither for cleanliness nor amusement. "I never trouble about them," said she. "They seem perfectly happy."

When a custom borrowed from a foreign country fits in comfortably and accomplishes a purpose, I think it is worth adopting. But apart from an educational value, I do not particularly enjoy the wholesale transplanting of Japanese objects to America. They merely seem incongruous. They strike an inharmonious note.

I am thinking of a large estate in New England, in the midst of which one comes on a Japanese garden. In spite of the fact that it is about as well done as it could be outside of Japan, it strikes me only as amusing and senseless. Why rejoice in picturing landscape in miniature, when we have only to lift our eyes to see the real thing?

I should deprecate the building of Japanese houses for general use in this country. They do not suit our climate, except, perhaps, in California. But I do claim that the principles I have mentioned could be applied happily here, and should be studied, both in our building and furnishing. If only the hearts of our people cried out for the simple, the beautiful in outline, for the accent where it is needed, our architects and our contractors would hammer together something less prosaic, less inconvenient than the average house we are called upon to live in! Are we too busy to insist on this? The Japanese are both busy and artistic.



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